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THE HERMIT OF LOVER'S LANE



CORNELIA MINOR ARNOLD

"O, she was most precious, as the wind's puff was fair,
What did I give her when I had her on my knee?"

Red klapas for her coral lips, a red comb for her hair;

She took my gifts, she took my heart, and fled away from me."

—Gypsy Verse.

THE HERMIT OF LOVER'S LANE

BY

CORNELIA MINOR ARNOLD

Author of "Stonefield Silhouettes," "Historical Scrapbook," "The Laying
of the Manor Ghost," Etc.

"Glamourie slept in her eyes, terribly calm in the tumult.
Hidden and secret and sweet was the smile of her crimson mouth."

—*Gypsy Verses.*



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221



"He would often stand before his hut in the sweet twilight of the summer night, and look up and down the grassy lane * * * watching for the woman he had married in a moment of madness."

THE HERMIT OF LOVER'S LANE.

"Spring was sweet and keen in his blood,
Singing, he sought his mate.
The wife for the life and time of his mood,
Formed for his needs by fate."

—*Gypsy Verses.*

Absalom Clabby halted his yoke of oxen in the furrow, while he lifted a torn hat from his brow and wiped therefrom the sweat of honest toil. The brow was white and well shaped though the spring sun had spread a healthy russet over face and neck. He passed a strong brown hand through his wavy hair, and leaned on the plough handles, while the sleek handsome red oxen, perfectly matched, and with marvelous breadth of horn finished with polished brass buttons, stood with eyes almost closed, and ruminated placidly.

Absalom had followed the plough all day, beguiling his labor by singing psalm tunes in a sweet tenor. He had a good voice, and was popular at "singin' skewl," while in "meetin'" it rose strong and clear above the cracked and quavering tones of the congregation.

Now as he looked over the spring landscape green with tender buds, and the ploughed lands, with their promise of a rich harvest, he sang by strange contrast, a verse from "Habakkuk" as the tune was called in "The Shawm," the old board covered psalm book used in the Congregational meeting.

"Altho' the vine its fruit deny,
Altho' the olive yield no oil—
The withering fig tree droop and die,
The fields elude the tiller's toil."

It was one of those days filled with "the light that never

was on sea or land," and a vague restless longing for something outside of his life, he knew not what, filled his breast. The odor of freshly turned earth, the high sweet monotone of peepers in the marsh at the foot of the hill, and the soft warble of a bluebird

"—Shifting his light load of song
From post to post along the cheerless fence."

all appealed to the senses, and the sum total was unrest, a feeling which may be described by the paradox of "sweet sorrow."

His eye rested on his matched yoke, and a thrill of pleasure moved him, as he noted their sleek hides and perfect points. But comforting as a fine ox team may be, they did not fill the void that ached in his bosom.

"Dunno whut ails me. Cal'late I better take some yarb tea; reckon I'm bilious," he soliloquized.

A warm April shower fell in sparkling gems, though the sun shone brightly; a robin, his red breast glowing in its late beams, burst into a jubilant song of praise. A rainbow curved its splendid arch, seeming to end behind a small white house on the adjoining hill, which stood out clear against a dark spring cloud.

Charity Eels lived in that house, and Absalom had been seeing her home from "singin' skewl." In country parlance he had been "sparking" her. His discomfort grew. He wondered if his vague discontent had anything to do with her. Perhaps it had.

"I reckon I'd better walk over tonight, an' clench th' bargain with Charity. She's a pretty gal, an a good one too," thought he.

Having made this good resolution, he settled his hat, took the plough handles in a firm grasp, called to his oxen "Whoa-haw-gee-g'lang, Star an' Bright," and began singing another psalm tune suited to his resolve.

“Come my Beloved, haste away,
Cut short the hours of thy delay.
Fly like a youthful hart or roe
Over the hills where the spices grow.”

Never again did Absalom sing these words; their association with that April day made them a song of sorrow instead of joy.

The oxen leaned forward in the creaking yoke, and the ploughshare turned over a roll of the rich black soil. As he approached the stone wall along the country road, he glanced down the highway, and beheld a sight which excited his rural curiosity. Passers were always interesting in the country, even of the most ordinary character, and the approaching multitude was worth halting to look at.

Several covered wagons painted red and green, were drawn by equines in a more or less perfect state of preservation, while led horses, many dogs, a few goats, a riotous crowd of strange looking children, and stranger men and women, proclaimed the party as a band of gypsies let loose from enforced winter quarters by the welcome spring.

As Absalom watched them, a feeling of repulsion, a true Puritan hatred of the wandering Ishmaelites, their mode of life and lack of morals and religion seized his emotions. He could not refrain from looking at them however, and even the oxen opened their mild eyes widely to stare at the clan.

Withered swarthy hags peered out from the wagons, their repulsiveness accentuated by long pinchbeck ear-rings set with gaudy imitation jewels, heavy necklaces encircled bony and yellowed necks, bracelets and bangles clattered together, while large rings covered dirty hands.

A dim idea, unformed in words, came to Absalom, of the need of youth and beauty to make such things endurable, and he remembered his mother's plain homespun gown and little quilted black silk bonnet with a measure of satisfaction.

Old men with gold hoops in their ears, jaunty young men with black loosely curling hair, embroidered jackets, and high black sheepskin caps, mingled with gaily dressed young women, making a bright dash of color in the pale spring landscape.

Suddenly a woman separated herself from the crowd, and came boldly up to the stone wall.

She was lithe, young and graceful, with olive skin like velvet, great eyes that one moment seemed of midnight blackness, and the next held topaz lights in their depths, jet black hair in two massive braids almost to her knees, and scarlet lips. Those lips! They held Absalom's eyes as a serpent holds a bird. Never in dull pale New England had he seen such lips, such eyes, such color. It was as if a gorgeous midsummer day, all light and brilliance and bloom should suddenly burst into being from the cold gray fogs of February.

How had he thought Charity beautiful, with her gray eyes, rose tinted cheeks, and simple Quakerish gown? Charity had an old amethyst brooch, an heirloom, which she seldom wore, lest it should be too gay. Charity's gowns were of gray-blue to match her eyes. She suddenly seemed plain and pale as a windflower beside a full blown flaming peony. This girl's dress was of scarlet, with yellow trimming and gilt tinsel embroidery.

Yet the scarlet gown paled beside those wonderful lips. She wore on her bosom a bunch of flowers gathered in the swampy ground at the foot of the hill, dull purplish red trillium, with its strange ill scented bloom. Absalom had always thought "Wake-robin," as it was familiarly called, a noxious malodorous weed. Now it seemed rare and beautiful as an orchid, absolutely in harmony with the strange brilliant creature before him.

Even the heavy jewelry which seemed so vulgar on the

older gypsies enhanced her eerie beauty. She stood a moment silently, a smile parting the wonderful lips, displaying teeth, regular and white as ivory.

Absalom stood transfixed, oblivious to all the world except the Romany maid. Doubtless she fully realized his amazement and admiration, for the smile was tinged with scorn. She spoke in a deep rich contralto.

“Sarshan, giorgio! Rakessa tu Romanis?” (Greeting, Gentile! Do you speak the Romany language?)

Absalom stammered a few incoherent words. The gypsy laughed aloud,—a bubbling liquid laugh, like the song of the wood thrush. Verily, she was a scarlet sorceress. Then she spoke in good English.

“Gilda, the Zingara, speaks, oh son of New England. Cross the gypsy maiden’s palm with silver, and she will unfold to thee thy life; the past, the present and the future. Gilda is the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, and the veil lay on her eyes at birth, which when lifted reveals the future. Lo, Fate hath somewhat in store for thee!”

The topaz light faded from her eyes, and they glittered.

Unwillingly Absalom stepped from the furrow, and came slowly to the stone wall. Gilda held out her hand, and Absalom, with reluctance in spite of his admiration extended his. As their hands met an electric shock seemed to pass up his arm; he drew away his hand, and put it behind his back.

A chorus of laughter went up from the gypsy crew, and Absalom blushed like a girl. An old hag bedecked with heavy jewelry came forward, pushing Gilda aside, saying in a whining insinuating voice—

“Goot efenin’! I lof you ferry well; ’ow de do! Let the Romany Dye (Gipsy mother) speak. The beautifool, lofely young man, he wants be *dukkered*. (Have fortune told.) He no ’fraid ol’ Dye. “*Besh Alay; lel a bitti rakkerben.*” (Sit

down; have a little talk.)

She seated herself on the stone wall, and seized Absalom's unwilling hand. She glanced at his work hardened palm, and cast her eyes to heaven, placing her disengaged hand on her heart.

"Oh, the lofely Giorgio! He born under planets o' Venus an' Juno! He have the long life line! He two time *rummered* (married.) He be soon *rummered*, yes,—before this moon grow dark! He no have seek gold, silver, jewels; they come to him! But ah, the sorrow,—the sorrow!"

Absalom's senses returned to him with a rush. He snatched back his hand, and returned to the plough, wheeled the oxen about and began his furrow across the long field. Looking back, he saw Gilda gazing after him, her eyes full of topaz lights. The old woman laughed shrilly, and called after him "Latcho ratti!" (Good night.) Absalom sang no more; when he reached the other side of the field, he carefully scanned the road before returning. Nothing was in sight except the covered wagons and caravan moving slowly up the next hill. Absalom drew a deep breath and retraced the field, thinking of a pair of scarlet lips and strange eyes.

As he halted his oxen by the wall, suddenly there uprose from the ground the gypsy Gilda. She had been seated where the wall concealed her. She approached him, holding out both hands, with a smile no longer scornful and mocking, but full of allurements. Had Absalom thought her eyes black? The eyes looking into his were no more black than were Charity's.

They were a warm soft yellow, full of sunlight, clear as a mountain brook, tender as the budding spring. And those scarlet lips! They stood speechless gazing in each others' eyes, Absalom with his Saxon face, deep blue eyes and fair wavy hair; the gypsy girl, doubtless the child of Spanish blood, with olive velvet skin and long black braids—a strange contrast.

After a moment of silence the gypsy spoke. Her voice was as the murmur of a singing stream.

"Beautiful Giorgio," she said, "Gilda could not leave thee. There is that in thy palm she must tell thee, and she could not speak in the presence of the Romany Rye (Gypsy gentleman) and the Romany Dye." (Gypsy mother.)

She took his hand in both her own; a mesmeric current seemed to flow through his arm. His head swam, and all the world seemed blotted out except those lips! Gilda gently turned his hand so that the palm was visible, and continued.

"What is the past?—though Gilda could tell thee! It is only the beautiful present and the joyous future that we need know. The Romany Dye Esmerelda was right;—a long life, riches, and twice *rummered*." She sighed deeply, and repeated, "Alas, twice married! Yet why should the gypsy weep that another cherishes his old age, when his youth and beauty are hers? The Zingara's life is short and merry. Let those drag through the weakness and infirmity of age who will. Spring and summer for the Romany, autumn and winter for the Giorgio. It is well!"

Absalom knew not what to say. At last he said hesitatingly—"Am,—am I to—marry? Can ye see aught o' th' maid? Is she light complected with gray eyes,—or is she—?"

"A fair maiden!" laughed the gypsy with an unpleasant ring in her mirth. "Nay, nay! Thy wife is dark, she has eyes like a fawn, sometimes black, and again yellow, she has a torrent of jet black hair, she—" the girl paused significantly.

"She will rest in thy arms ere that faint young fingernail of a moon which lies on the western horizon shall wax and wane. Yea, she shall rest in thy strong arms, even as the new moon holds the old moon in her arms. Love is the only thing in this wide world. Gilda has sought it in many countries. Turn not away when it comes to thee!"

Gently she drew his hand to her, and before Absalom could realize what was happening, his lips were pressed to hers, --wonderful, warm, scarlet.

Gilda sprang from him into the road, as he would have caught her in his arms, and with a radiant smile, said as the Romany Dye Esmerelda had done, "Latcho ratti!" She was gone. He looked about him bewildered. The spring evening was falling, and there in the west was the new moon, with the old moon in its arms. A tin horn was blowing at the farm house. It was "Aunt Nabby" as his mother was known, calling him to supper. Mechanically he unhitched the oxen from the plough, and took his homeward way. He sat down to the supper table as usual, but scarcely ate, in place of his customary excellent appetite.

"What ails ye, Absalom?" asked his mother. "Reckon your liver's upsot. I'll fix ye up some yarb tea. Did ye see that gang of gypsies go 'long a spell ago? Ye better nail up th' barn door tonight, an' don't leave th' hosses out to paster. Nail up th' chicken coop, while ye're 'bout it, too. I sense it's a lot o' trouble, but it's better to be sure than sorry. Ther' aint nuthin' safe when that scum comes traipsin' roun'."

Absalom felt a slow sense of indignation. Nothing was ever locked and bolted on the farm.

"Nabby's right" added "Uncle Isaiah," as Absalom's father was known. "These here latter day Ishmaelites aint no good fer this worl' ner the nex'. Strange the Gov'ment lets 'em stroll roun' like a pack o' jackals. They oughter be ketched, an' sot to work with a ball an' chain hitched to 'em. Ther' was one on'em come trampoosin' past, arter th' bunch hed gone by, with a bright red gown. She reminded me o' th' "Scarlet Woman" mentioned in Scriptur'."

A dull wrath pervaded Absalom. Was beautiful Gilda an Ishmaelite, who should be hampered with a ball and chain?

"Uncle Isaiah" was not misnamed for his prophetic prototype. He was a tall patriarchal man, with long white hair floating on his shoulders, and a beard like that of the prophets. Had he dressed in flowing robes, he might have served as a model for Moses himself. He was deeply religious according to his lights, and the language of Scripture was to him as his native air. Much of his spare time had been spent in poring over the Old Testament, and its majestic language fell from his lips as naturally as his daily conversation. Strangely enough, while he spoke the prevailing vernacular ordinarily, in Scriptural quotation and in prayer, his English was pure and undefiled, untainted with provincial colloquialism.

His imposing presence, knowledge of Scripture, and eloquent delivery, made him an object of surprise and admiration to strangers.

After supper Absalom nailed up the buildings in accordance with instructions, and in spite of his day's ploughing, wandered about with unrest. He was the only child, and there was none in the family to whom he could open his heart about the events of the afternoon, since he knew without doubt his family's sentiments toward the gypsy race.

He reasoned that their camp could not be far distant, as it was so late in the day when they halted at the field. A wild desire to see those lips overwhelmed him, and he at last yielded to the temptation to search for the gypsy camp.

Hastily changing his working clothes for his Sunday garments, he met his mother as he left the house.

"Be ye goin' over to Charity's?" asked she. "Ef ye be, I wish ye'd fetch me the pattern o' the block fer thet new kind o' quilt; she promised to let me hev it."

Absalom started guiltily.

"Yes, I'm goin' over to Charity's," he said slowly.

His mother went in the kitchen where her husband sat

reading, holding a tallow candle close to the page.

"Absalom gettin' ruther thick over to Charity's" said she with a pleased smile. "I do hope its suthin' more'n puppy love. She'd make a good wife fer our son, an' she'll hev means one o' these days."

"He's allus hed good sense," said his father placidly. "Absalom's got too much Clabby blood in him to pick up one o' them 'ere highty-tighty fly-away gals, all ribbins, an' hoop skirts, and folderols. When he undertakes to 'lead about a wife,' as saith St. Paul, he'll do credit to hisself an' to us 'too, mark my words!"

"Wal, I do hope so, I'm sure," replied his wife. "The kind o' marriage a man gets into makes or mars his hull life. They do say that a man hes to ax his wife's leave to git rich."

"Blood will tell!" responded the old man proudly. "An' th' Clabby blood came over in th' Mayflower!"

Meanwhile Absalom pursued his expedition of discovery, regardless of his ancestors, both remote and recent. A pair of scarlet lips and saffron eyes were his lodestar and goal; he saw them in the sunset sky, and through the gloom, "so softly dark, and darkly pure" of the spring evening; he heard that rippling laugh in the wayside brook, and the pleasant noises of the night. Never was mariner more swiftly and completely captivated by siren, or Rhine voyager by the Lorelei, than was Absalom Clabby, the descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers, by the vagrant daughter of the Romany tribe.

Presently he caught the odor of wood smoke, and saw the gleam of camp fires in a glade at the edge of a wood. The twang of violin strings and the thrum of zithers mingled with the stamp of picketed horses. He withdrew behind the massive trunk of an oak, and stood absolutely without plan or purpose. He did not know why he had come; he only knew he could not keep away. The staid, sober young New Englander had

never before been so carried off his feet in all his proper, well regulated existence.

The old men and women sat smoking around the fires, while the young men thrummed on musical instruments, breaking occasionally into a wild song, unintelligible to their listener.

Suddenly the players burst forth with the music of the "Czardas," the national dance of the Magyars, one motif slow and stately, the other wild and rapid. The wailing of the violin and the clash of the cymbal spoke with the voices of "love and rage, fierce passion, and unutterable sadness."

Suddenly there darted into the circle of firelight a scarlet robed figure moving with the lightness and sinuous grace of the panther, now swaying with uplifted arms, now clapping her hands, and anon whirling dizzily with the abandon of a Nautch dancing girl, and finally moving with slow easy grace, and elegance of movement. It was Gilda.

As she danced she gradually gained the outer edge of the circle of fire light, and at last passed beyond it, and was lost in the darkness of the wood.

While Absalom strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of scarlet, a hand was laid on his arm. He started in sudden fright; he had heard nothing, not the breaking of a twig, or a movement in the undergrowth. Gilda stood beside him.

"Fear not, Giorgio," said she. "Did Gilda startle thee? Her heart called her, she knew not why. When the heart calls, Gilda follows. She is not deceived."

Absalom stammered some incoherent words; the strange spell of her personality crept over his senses.

Gilda continued:—"Soon the Romany Rye and the Romany Dye will go their way through the spring weather. Soon, too soon, will Gilda be torn from one whom she loved when she first looked in his eyes. Why should not the heart speak, when time is so short, and eternity so long? The

Romany speaks when the Giorgio is silent ; but though the lips answer not, the heart cries aloud."

"Oh," cried Absalom, startled from his New England unresponsiveness—"Gilda, it is true! It is true! Do not leave me; do not go when they—these people,—do. Stay, and be my wife! I never saw a woman like you. Tell me, you are not married?"

"Gilda is a Romany maiden, and of high birth," said she, drawing herself up proudly. "Gilda is a Gypsy princess. Her father is King of the Gypsies in another country. But she loves not the men of gypsy blood. She loves the fair hair and blue eyes of this cold country. Gilda fled lest she be married to a Romany she loved not."

Absalom's heart expanded with sympathy. Her fascination had woven its spell, and all else was forgotten. He caught her hand.

"Gilda, you belong to me! When will you marry me?"

She answered, scarcely breathing,—“In yeck, dui, trin,—yes, in one, two, three days,—in three days from now, Gilda will be thy gypsy bride. Meet me in three nights, here at this hour.”

Suddenly a step in the underbrush warned them that a gypsy was approaching on his return from some nightly raid. In an instant Gilda was gone, noiselessly as a dryad. Absalom stood in silence until the gypsy, a slouching, black, ill-favored fellow, had passed into camp.

Immediately a dispute and brawl broke out between two young Romanys and the new comer; a confusion of unintelligible language rent the air, and loud shouts of what was apparently the names of two of the men—"Rudi! Rudi! Sandor! Sandor!" ensued.

In the confusion Absalom gained the road, and the thought

came to him that he had told his mother that he was going to Charity's.

Yes, he must go to Charity. He must tell her that his past attentions were naught. Absalom was straight forward and honorable, and he had no doubt led her to believe that marriage was in his thought.

As soon as he knew, he must tell Charity. He strode toward her home with the determination to have the unpleasant thing over as soon as possible. She met him at the gate, in the sweet moon-lit eve, with a happy smile. She was dressed in her simple best, and wore the amethyst brooch. She wore a cluster of flowers also. Not purplish red trillium, but pure white blood-root. Plainly, she had expected that he would come. Absalom was no silver-tongued orator. He aimed bunglingly directly at the heart of the matter.

"No, Charity, I wont come in. I come to tell ye—that I hoped—that ye havn't thought that I,—that is, I thought so myself until today—oh, what I want to say is that I'm afeard I've given ye reason to think that I meant to pop the question, but I can't, I can't! I've seen the only woman I could ever love. I couldn't help it, Charity,—I told her so,—don't feel hard! Forgive me!"

Charity turned white as the bunch of closed bloodroot on her heaving breast, and slowly turning went into the house without answer. Indeed, she was incapable of speech. Absalom, with a strange feeling that the world was out of joint, walked slowly home. His quiet sea of life had in a few hours become a whirlpool, and for a girl strange in every particular of birth, thought, and habit, whom he had seen but twice.

As he passed through the kitchen on his way upstairs his mother called out from her bedroom:—"Absalom, did ye remember to git that quilt pattern o' Charity?"

"No, mother," he answered. "I didn't think on't."

"Aint young fellers all alike, father?" said Mrs. Clabby to her husband. "Gals in, wits out o' their heads. I s'pose he 'n Charity's so wrapped up in the'r own affairs, ther' aint nothin' else on 'arth. Wall, I'm mighty thankful he's picked out such a nice wife!"

"A Clabby's head is allus level on both business an' love," replied the old man with deep satisfaction.

The mistaken couple peacefully slept, while the son whose prudence had been extolled, tossed restlessly, with broken snatches of dreams in which he saw scarlet lips and topaz eyes.

The three days passed like a dream to Absalom; he moved through his usual duties in a daze which caused much comment between his father and mother.

"I've seen young fellers in love afore, but it seems to me I never seen none *quite* so daffy es Absalom," said Uncle Isaiah.

"Oh fly, father! 'Pears to me I ricolleck when ye hed a spell o' th' same disease," replied the old lady smiling slyly.

"I sartin never wus so silly actin' es this, mother!" said the old man. "Never in this 'arthful world!"

The fatal third day came, as all days good and bad have a habit of coming. At the appointed time Absalom's horse and buggy stood at the edge of the wood, he and Gilda had met at the rendezvous, and gone in search of a minister who would marry them, a somewhat difficult pursuit. Absalom had insisted on a marriage by clergy, while Gilda was not in the least troubled about ceremonial rites. Parson Kellogg refused point blank, nor could any one be found who would undertake the doubtful task, until the Millerite leader, old Elder Tweddle was persuaded to tie the ill-assorted knot.

As it was late before this feat was accomplished, Absalom left his bride at the gypsy camp, with the intention of breaking the dire news at home in the morning. But when the clear

light of day shone on the matter, he found it impossible to open his mouth to his father and mother, though he still was as madly infatuated with the gypsy as ever.

"Colors seen by candle light
Do not look the same by day."

However, that evening he gathered together his courage and told the tale of his folly. Isaiah Clabby sat in the kitchen reading as usual by holding a tallow candle close to the paper. His wife sat knitting by the firelight, for the spring evenings were still cool. Upon this scene of domestic peace Absalom's confession fell like lightning from a clear sky.

When it had been made absolutely clear to their minds that their only child, Absalom Clabby, a Mayflower descendant, and a member of the Congregational "meetin'," had wilfully and with malice aforethought married a gypsy whom he had seen for the first time three days before, and the identical "scarlet woman" whom Isaiah had seen "trampoosin' past," they were at first too stunned to find words. Mrs. Clabby, after the way of women, first recovered her power of speech, and burst into wild reproaches.

"Her manners had not that repose
Which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere."

Mrs. Clabby talked long and shrilly, while her husband sat in silence, and Absalom stood sulkily by. She exhausted her vituperation on the Delilah who had led her son from the beaten paths of New England decorum, ending by saying:

"Who married ye, or did ye jump over a broomstick? I've heerd tell that was the way them wild gypsy folks got married, an' I mistrust thet when they git sick on't, they jest jump back agin, an' call themselves single!"

Mrs. Clabby folded her arms in her apron, and rocked in an abandon of grief. Presently she burst forth again:

"A mis'able traipsin' trollope! I don't s'pose she wus

ever inside a Congregational meetin' house, in all her born days,
an' dunno even thet

"In Adam's fall,
We sinned all."

"I s'pose she never heerd o' foreordination, predestination
sanctification an' justification ! O, dear me suz-a-day ! Whut
shell I do ? "

Uncle Isaiah waited in silence until his wife's grief had
spent its audible expression. His paper had fallen to the floor,
and he set the candlestick on the table beside him. Then he
arose, looking with his stately height, and long white hair and
beard as one of the prophets might have done, when pronounc-
ing doom upon a wayward nation.

He raised one hand, and held it a moment in silence.
When at last he spoke, it was in the majestic language of the
prophets.

"Arise, cry out in the night ; in the beginning of the
watches pour out thy heart like water."

"Suddenly are my tents spoiled, and my curtains in a
moment."

"Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to
aliens."

"Now is my house left unto me desolate."

"A foolish son is the heaviness of his mother."

"And why wilt thou, my son, be ravished with a strange
woman ? "

"The mouth of a strange woman is a deep pit. He that
is abhorred of the Lord shall fall therein."

"And behold, I mourn as one mourneth for his only son,
as one that is in bitterness for his first-born."

"Gird thee with sackcloth, and wallow thyself in ashes ;
make thee mourning as for an only son, most bitter lamentation ;
for the spoiler shall suddenly come upon us."

“ O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom ! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son ! ”

“ Let us pray.” The old man fell upon his knees, and raised both hands to heaven.

“ Oh Lord, have mercy on our Absalom. Thou knowest that a strange woman hath led him away from the path of our Puritan fathers, but wilt Thou put Thy hook in his jaws, and pull him back to Thee.

Thou hast added one to our family ; it may be Thy will ; it would never have been mine ! If it is of Thee, do Thou bless the connection. But if the poor fool hath been and done it out of carnal desire, may the cold wind of adversity settle on his habitation ! Amen, and Amen.”

Uncle Isaiah rose to his feet, and the three looked at each other. Then Absalom turned sullenly, and passed out of the door. His mother was seized with a sudden revulsion of feeling. Was he not her only child ? She ran after him, crying—

“ Absalom, stay with us tonight. Give yer father an’ me time to think. Ye’re all we hev, an’ this was so suddint, sech a blow ! ”

After much persuasion he finally yielded, and went up to his room. In truth, he knew not where to go, the whole thing had been done so upon blind impulse. He could not go to the gypsy camp, he had no place to take his wife. All night long his father and mother talked together of this sudden calamity. Early in the morning they sent for Parson Kellogg and laid bare their grief, asking his council. Finally natural affection prevailed, coupled with the peaceful advice of the minister, that since the misfortune had fallen, they should accept the wild stranger, teach her so far as possible, the customs of New England, and lead her in the paths of righteousness. So would their skirts be cleared of responsibility toward a heathen, and parental duty to their son would be fulfilled.

So it came to pass that the "scarlet woman" came from the woodland ways, and the long roads that stretch away over the hills, to the New England farm, and the straight and narrow path laid out as that of virtue.

Now began the struggle of Aunt Nabby's life, the problem of fitting a square peg into a round hole. Gilda's manners, her thoughts, and her habits were a revelation to the unwilling mother-in-law, and of nothing did she approve. She insisted that the gypsy bride should lay aside the offending scarlet dress, and wear the dull shades of homespun; that her black braids should be pinned tightly around her head, and re-christened Gilda with the prosaic name of Sarah Ann.

Mrs. Clabby took her reconstructed daughter-in-law to meetin', bitter as was the process of running the gauntlet of curious eyes, and shocking as were the gypsy's errors in etiquette, willful and otherwise. Even her beauty seemed in a measure laid aside with her native dress.

Naturally she was absolutely without domestic instincts, and Aunt Nabby was a notable housewife. Even the food of the gypsy was strange, and she scorned the sacred baked bean.

The only things the caged eagle was willing to do, were to play on a mandolin which she had brought with her, drink hard cider and roam the fields. Once Mrs. Clabby took her to a missionary meeting, hoping that some seed might fall in good ground in the heathen's heart, and Gilda at the most solemn moment had sprang up and danced the Czardas!

She seized the passing communion cup, and drank to the last drop its contents of homemade wine, to the horror of the deacons, the amusement of the congregation, and the mortification of Aunt Nabby.

Also, dirty old gypsy women and impudent looking young men, especially one called Rudi, haunted the back door to the horror of Uncle Isaiah, and the terror of his wife.

The climax came when Gilda seemed ill and drowsy, and after a period of stupid seeming unconsciousness, Dr. Pumpelly, who was sent for in haste, pronounced her simply drunk !

Affairs in the Clabby family daily grew more strained, until at last they were indeed "on the knees of the gods."

Absalom was still under Gilda's spell, and often secretly did foolish things which would have reduced his parents to the verge of despair, had they known of them. She persuaded him to bury all his money beside a stone wall under a tree in the pasture, telling him that money so planted would grow, and that Esmeralda had said he should be rich.

She assured him that gypsies always buried money when they wished it to increase, and when he pointed out the impossibility, she asked him if he did not always bury grain which he wanted to grow, and at length prevailed on him to bury his nest-egg, foolish as he knew it to be.

Aunt Nabby faithfully endeavored to instruct her wild daughter-in-law in Congregational doctrines, in needlework, domestic ways, and all that made for New England virtues. One day she felt impelled to impress on Gilda the honor that had been bestowed on her in marrying a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers. Gilda drew herself up with flashing eyes.

"What were these Mayflower men? Farmers, laborers! She had heard of them before! Gilda descends from *kings*.—from King Zindl, from King Cristall! Her line goes back hundreds of years before this skiff, this dory, called the Mayflower brought over its load of peasants! Gilda's fathers wore velvets and satins when Ab-so-leem's wore dornick! Gilda is a Princess! The honor is all Ab-so-leem's!"

The sturdy New England woman quailed before the fury of her royal daughter-in-law, and thereafter ventured not to attempt the education of this descendant of kings.

So life dragged on for weeks, and matters must soon have

reached a crisis, when one morning Gilda, who had a plebeian early morning habit, for a Princess, of sucking raw eggs, did not return from her customary raid on the hen's nests in the barn. As the day passed without her return, toward evening Absalom went up to the gypsy camping ground, only to find a vacancy where the wagons had stood. Nothing remained to tell of their presence except trampled grass with spots worn bare, greasy paper and dirty linen, bones and scraps of vegetables, feathers, and a few soiled and ragged garments left hanging on bushes.

Sickness of heart filled Absalom; he was still fascinated by this strange woman, in spite of the problem and bone of contention which she had been in the family.

Suddenly his thought reverted to the buried money, and stopping in the pasture, he found the earth newly disturbed, and the money gone.

Slowly he returned home with the tale of their departure. His mother was unable to conceal her joy, while his father's sole comment was:—"Render them a recompense, O Lord, according to the work of their hands."

Gossip and comment was naturally rife for many miles. The tale of Absalom's matrimonial venture had crept even over into "York State." People looked at him curiously, and whispered together before his back was turned. His mother, in feminine fashion, could not refrain from an occasional remark of satisfaction that the family was rid of the disturbing element. Absalom grew more reticent and secluded, and at last, as the pricks of home and neighborhood comment, and "the stings and arrows of outrageous fortune" became more annoying, he left the house, and betook himself to a little shanty used in maple sugar time, down a wood road in the depths of a sugar bush. He went nowhere, was social with none, laboring daily on the farm, and retreating to his lonely cabin at the close of the day.

Soon the neighbors dubbed him "The Hermit," and the

pretty wood road, "Lover's Lane." So Absalom became known as "The Hermit of Lover's Lane." Though often urged to return home by his father and mother, autumn leaves fell in their yellow drift, and snow blocked the road, yet Absalom remained.

Spring came back with its sweet sounds and odors. A year had been rounded out since the fateful day when Absalom ploughed the upland field, singing as he went, and the disturber of his peace came up the road, and smiled with lips and eyes to his undoing.

One night there was a wild spring storm. The south-wester whistled, shrieked and groaned around the little shanty, the trees rocked and writhed, and from time to time wild gusts of rain drove against the window, and shook the door like one determined on entering.

Absalom sat leaning with his head on his hands, absorbed in bitter retrospect. Suddenly a wail was mingled with the shrieking of the wind,—a wail which had a strangely human intonation. Absalom started up and listened.

Again the cry, mingled with a dash of rain. He sprang to the door; upon the step lay a bundle which he hesitatingly lifted, and unwrapping an old shawl, a young child looked up from its folds. A lusty howl testified to the infant's disapprobation. Absalom dropped it as if it burned him.

Here was a predicament which distracted him from his sorrows. Finally he decided that he must examine the clothing, as a horrid fear began to oppress him. Handling the fearful creature timidly, he found around its neck a locket suspended by a string,—a locket which he had given Gilda. On opening it, his own face looked out at him. Here was a new complication before which his past troubles withdrew to the background.

He had not thought of such a possibility. What should he, what could he do with this mite of a few weeks, which

screwed up a funny little mouth, and blinked a pair of expressionless eyes, while it waved its arms aimlessly about. He cautiously extended a finger, which was seized and held firmly.

At last Absalom realized that something must be done for this little rain-drenched creature. He was as awkward as most men with the young of the human species, and he gingerly removed the wet shawl and wrapped the baby in his coat. The infant still howled. Absalom began to suspect that it might be hungry. Of course that was the matter! The only young things that he had experience with were chickens, calves and lambs, one of the latter reposing in a bushel basket of hay behind the stove at the moment. He had found the little creature chilled when the sheep were folded that night. An inspiration came to Absalom. Why not feed the baby with milk prepared for the lamb? He was past master at nursing chilled lambs, and what was good for a lamb, must certainly be good for a baby!

Therefore very shortly the infant was lying beside the lamb in the basket, and placidly feeding from the lamb's bottle, on warm milk, sweetened with molasses, and flavored with a dash of black pepper!

Absalom spent a sleepless night. What could he do with this new perplexity, fallen as lightning from a clear sky? Verily he had sown the wind, and reaped the whirlwind. He would not ask his mother to undertake the infant's care; she was well advanced in years, and he knew would regard the child as of the viper's brood, forgetting that her own blood flowed in its veins. A desperate thought of Charity crossed his vexed spirit, dismissed with a qualm of self reproach. At last in the cold gray of the early morning he came to a decision. He would take the child to the town farm, the overseer of which had been friendly, so far as Absalom permitted. He would leave it with

Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs, and pay for its care. He acted at once, wishing to run the gauntlet of the distance to the town farm before early risers were abroad.

Ahi Hobbs listened sympathetically to Absalom's story, and his wife, a motherly creature, took the burden from the father's awkward arms. She chirruped to the mite, which opened a pair of wondering eyes and regarded her gravely.

"Aint it a cute little creetur!" exclaimed she. "An' so knowin'! See it look up an' breathe! Is it a boy er a gal, Absalom?"

Absalom started. The idea had not occurred to him at all. It was just a baby, his analysis had gone no further. He blushed like a peony, and stammered something unintelligibly.

But Mrs. Hobbs was chucking the baby under the chin, and talking equally unintelligible language to it, in the midst of which Absalom made his escape.

A few days later as he was working in the field, Mr. Hobbs called to him in passing.

"Wal, Absalom, yer darter's a gal, an' a mighty peart un, too!" He drew nearer the fence, and said in a low voice:—"Absalom, come up clus ter th' fence; I want ter talk ter yer."

He told Absalom that Charity Eels had come to the town farm, and asked for the baby girl, promising to bring her up in the narrow path of New England virtue.

"I cal'late Charity feels lonesome like, sence she lost her maw, an' nobuddy lef' but her brother. Be ye willin' to let her hev a try?" concluded Ahi. Absalom's heart gave a mighty leap. He had often thought of Charity and her sweet gentleness, and imagined her with his child in her arms.

"I'm more'n willin', Ahi. I know yer wife's good es she kin be, but she hes so much on her hands, 'thout carin' fer a baby. But ther's one thing I must do. I'll pay ye reg'lar, an' you hand it over to Charity."

So it was arranged, and the village had another nine days wonder to gossip over. Time passed, and Absalom was still the Hermit of Lover's Lane. His parents were gathered to their fathers, but he did not return to his old home.

The thrall of the gypsy was still at times over him, and he would often stand before his hut in the sweet twilight of the summer night, and look up and down the grassy lane, shaded with the interwoven arch of forest trees, and out where its vista opened on the western sky, where the sunset waved its banners of daffodil, purple, and gold, watching for the woman he had married in a moment of madness.

But Gilda never came, and as the years passed with their relentless tread, Absalom's hair became frosted, until at fifty he looked an old man. He had regularly left a sum of money with Ahi, long since retired from the poor farm, to be devoted to the child's upbringing.

Ahi had several times attempted to tell him of her, but he would not listen. It recalled too keenly the mistakes of his youth, and the life of loneliness and sorrow he had entailed on himself.

Another spring came, and one evening in the gloaming Absalom sat outside his hut, when he became aware of the approach of some one down the wood road. He gazed in surprise, as few intruders ventured on his solitude.

But presently he saw this was a stranger, a woman, ragged but gaudily attired. Her face was withered and wrinkled, hard in feature and expression, and she walked unsteadily, as one under the influence of strong drink.

She stopped before him, and laughed in a maudlin fashion. Suddenly she threw her arms around his neck, and laughing and weeping, demanded to know if Absalom did not recognize his wife, his Gilda?

He thrust her from him in a horror of repulsion. She knelt before him, crying—

"Rudi is dead,—poor Rudi! True, he beat Gilda, but he did it because he loved her. Poor Gilda! She has no one, now Rudi is gone, she comes back to the Giorgio. Ab-so-leem, he once loved Gilda. He will take her to himself? She is his gypsy bride."

Her breath, heavy with bad whiskey came in his face, and he shrunk further away, saying,—

"I don't know ye! Ye're drunk!"

She moaned and lamented, and relapsing into a patois of English and Romany, exclaimed—

"Ab-so-leem, the Giorgio, think Gilda *matto!* (Drunk.) True, Gilda stop in the *kitchema*, (tavern) but she only been *piin levinor*. (Drinking beer.) That not make drunk!"

"Go!" exclaimed Absalom. "Ye are not Gilda; ye're jest a common tramp!"

In reply the woman drew from her breast a cord on which was suspended the half of a silver coin.

"Know you this, Giorgio?" asked she with a sneer.

It was half of a silver piece which Absalom had divided as a love token during the brief madness which possessed him.

"Ab-so-leem," she went on in a wheedling, cajoling tone. "Be kind to Gilda. You say not even to her *besk alay*." (Sit down.)

She was becoming more under the influence of liquor. Her eyes, which had lost all their strange beauty, were dull and heavy.

"Gilda sick,—sick!" she went on. "Gilda travel far to see Ab-so-leem; to see her child, the baby Esmeralda, to give her a dowry,—before Gilda die. Where is the child? Tell Gilda quickly, before she cry aloud through the country for her flesh and blood, until she find her."

Absalom was chilled. He could not have Charity so troubled and annoyed, and the child must not see her mother.

Though he had never seen his offspring since the day when Mrs. Hobbs took her from his arms, though he did not even know by what name she was called, he would not have her thus humiliated, and again start the tongues of malicious gossip. He would quiet this creature by any means possible, and trust to fortune to keep her visit a secret. How dearly he had paid for his short folly! He was completely disenchanted, his love turned to loathing.

So, forcing a smile, he said, adopting her manner of speech:—

“Will not Gilda rest in the house of Absalom, and we will talk more afterward?”

The woman staggered into the little room, and fell across his bed, where she was presently in a drunken sleep, only stirring to say before wholly under its influence:—

“Under tree,—dig, dig; jewels,—silver and gold.”

Again Absalom spent a sleepless night, as he had done often before on her account. At daybreak, as she still slept heavily, he slipped out to attend to the cattle, and on his return she was gone. He searched the woods, but there was nothing to prove that he had not passed through a horrible nightmare.

Indeed, he was trying to persuade himself that such was the truth, when Ahi, who was almost the only one with whom he held conversation, told him that there was great excitement in the neighborhood, that a woman tramp had been found dead in a barn.

He talked on garrulously, drawn out by a few questions, until Absalom was certain that it was Gilda. A wild emotion of freedom and relief came to him, as he learned that no one had been found who had conversed with the woman, though she had been seen hanging around the vicinity for some days.

“Absalom,” continued the old man, “I don’t want ter hurt yer feelin’s, but I sort o’ suspected thet,—the woman wus,—

you know who,— an' I'm glad ye're free. She's safely buried in the poor farm corner o' th' Frog Holler buryin' groun'. Absalom, don't live in this shack the rest o' yer days ; ye're got es pooty a darter es ye need ter look at, an' Charity !—"

Then Absalom told Ahi of his night's vigil, and found great relief in speech after his silent years ; he cursed the folly that had sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Absalom spent the next week in deep thought ; at its end he went to the next village, where he bought new attire, and after the pruning of his hair and beard was accomplished, he looked as if the clock of Time had turned its hands backward on the dial. Absalom was a man of decision, and he had decided.

As he crossed the lots on his homeward way, he passed through the pasture where in days of folly he had buried his all at Gilda's instigation, and turned aside to look at the spot, as her incoherent words crossed his mind. To his astonishment, the earth had been disturbed, and on digging, he found a store of gold and silver coins, and precious stones, more in value than the farm on which they were buried. So this was Gilda's dowry for her daughter.

That evening, the young spring moon shone softly, the peepers in the marshes sang their shrill song, and Absalom turned his steps to Charity's home, even as he had done more than twenty years ago. A figure stood at the gate, even as of yore. Absalom knew who waited, even before a word was uttered.

"Charity," said he, "I have come back to ye, after years worse than wasted. Will ye take what is left o' my life, an' try to straighten out the tangled skein ? *She* is dead. I can only offer ye the last years of a life that should have been all yours, but for an awful mistake,—an awful mistake."

She answered in the low sweet voice that he so well remembered,—

"Absalom, I have waited for you all these years. I knew the time would come when you would need comfort, love and sympathy ; I have waited that I might give when you sought. A faithful woman can wait a life time for the man she loves."

A joyous young voice called from the doorway,—

"Aunty,—Aunt Charity ! Where are you?"

Absalom and Charity walked slowly up the path to the door. He looked almost in terror at the young girl who stood in the lamp light, fearing lest he should see scarlet lips and topaz eyes. To his joy and surprise a fair slender young girl looked at him with his mother's eyes, large serious blue-gray orbs.

"Absalom," said Charity solemnly, joining the hands of father and child, "I give to you your daughter. I loved her first for your sake, and after for her own. I have saved for her every penny that you have sent for her care these twenty years. She is as my own to me,—and her name is—*Hope!*"

Absalom stood as in a dream. Then, after the manner of old Isaiah, he spoke softly,—

"And Hope maketh not ashamed!" He went on gently, "Charity suffereth long and is kind * * * seeketh not her own * * * thinketh no evil * * * beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth."

He paused a moment, and finished solemnly :—

"But the greatest of these, is Charity."

The farmhouse door closed behind them, bound together by that threefold cord, which is not easily broken.

It shut out the sorrowful past, the mistakes and grief, and shut in Love, Joy, and Peace.

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